LIVING WITH DIFFERENCE AND OTHERNESS: A RESPONSE TO THE STORIES FROM CANADA, SPAIN AND ITALY

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A question for us

Reading the different stories from Italy, Spain and Canada, I ask myself what they have in common. Is there a binding theme between the Sant'Egidio communities ministry to educate the poor and the marginalized, the prison ministry of the Loiolaetxea Social Intervention Project in Spain and Romero House’s ministry to refugees in Canada? Again these stories raise many themes – the power of the Gospel in people’s lives, ministry as mission, the nature of hope, the task for the church,1 and Christian hospitality, are only some of the pertinent issues that permeate these stories. I believe that these stories have something very valuable to tell us – they are in essence stories of people reaching out across their differences seeking their common humanity as an imperative of the Gospel.

Armed with prayer and a calling to mission, the Sant'Egidio communities reach out across cultures and nations to serve the poor by working for justice. Francesco, a young student wants to teach children who have not enjoyed his privileges. The Spanish Life communities seek fraternity among excluded people, described by Marta as living “with people who are in situations where their life structure has broken down, [and] uprooted …without asking for anything in return”. Romero House is, according to Jacob, “…a place where people coming from profoundly different background- cultural, socioeconomic, and religious – live together…”. These encounters show us how people forge new relationships across their differences.

The question for us is: How well do we live across our differences? These stories raise the question of difference and otherness, a reality that confronts us in the church and our societies as we strive to live according to the values of the Gospel. I live in a multi-cultural, ethnically and religiously pluralistic society with eleven official languages, which has known the sweet smell of democracy only recently. It will therefore come as no surprise that the idea of difference is one that we South Africans are compelled to explore as we try to live respectfully and creatively in relationship with one another across our differences.

Why difference, why otherness?2

Few issues have exercised so powerful a hold over the thought of the 20th century as that of ‘the other’ or what is known as ‘the problem of difference’.3

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1 “The church” refers to the church universal in this paper.
3 Jacob Neusner, “Thinking about ‘The Other’ in religion: It is necessary, but is it possible?” in Lectures in Judaism in the History of Religions. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990, p. 17 writes: “The single most important problem facing religion for the next hundred years...is...how to think through difference, how to account, within one’s own faith and framework, for the outsider,
To speak of difference and otherness is immediately a problem of language. Other than whom? Different from what? Am I the norm and those who do not confirm to my norm ‘the other’ or ‘different’? Today this problem has taken a prominent place in philosophy, theological ethics and anthropology and has penetrated deeply into our reflections on our religious practices. I do not, therefore, see the theme of seeking relationship in difference and otherness as limited to my context.

The problem of difference lies at the heart of the inability of human beings to live together in justice, freedom and peace. We look back on the last century (ironically termed ‘the Christian century’ by the modern missionary movement) as one in which more people have suffered and died in war and conflict than ever before in human history. We are a broken world, a world in crisis, an age which threatens to make us numb to human suffering because it is so prevalent. In this paper I want to look briefly at the nature, problems and potential of otherness and difference before discussing what it could mean to live according to an ethic of relationship in otherness and difference.

Problematic responses to thinking about difference and otherness

The fact of difference elicits at least three problematic responses. The first, simply sees the other as a tabula rasa, a person with no story, no selfhood, no history. This response was common in certain missionary endeavours in the past. Many intrepid souls came to “darkest” Africa to bring the light of the gospel and then, on encountering the indigenous people whom they clearly found to be very ‘other’ - that is other than themselves - sadly failed to understand local stories, cultures and traditions to such an extent that they did not truly see the selfhood of these people. Difference was made over into sameness, in this case into the image of the missionary colonist, in the cause of the moment. The underlying text is: “You should be like me. But, as you are not like me, remember that I am the centre, the fixed point by which you and ‘the rest’ will be defined”. This is the language of dominant power. In reality, there is no one centre. There never was - except in the delusions of certain dominant philosophies and political systems. There are many centres. To acknowledge, to accept and be willing to live with difference and otherness is to admit that there are a myriad of centres.

A second response is a familiar one in today’s world. The other is experienced as a threat. The poisonous apartheid mentality of Afrikaner nationalism, the genocidal activities of the Nazis, the Hutus, and the present regime in Sudan, the intransigent otherness of the Serbs, Bosnians and Croats, militancy of religious fundamentalism and all racist and sexist attitudes, are contemporary examples of otherness as threat. Those in power say: “Only we have the truth indeed for many outsiders”.

4 See Collette Guillaumin, Racism, Sexism, Power and Ideology. London: Routledge, 1995, p.250 who points out that ‘difference comes form a Latin verb (fero) which means ‘to carry’, ‘to orient’. Differ-ence adds the idea of dispersion (di) to this orientation; we say ‘to differ from’. What is important is the little from....The kernel of the meaning is the distance from a centre, the distance from a referent (still fero).

and those who are different are our enemy”. When the other is a threat the strategy is to separate people and then, increasingly, to dominate and to demonise them.

Lastly, there is a response that sees the other as some exotic, romantic being who does not have to be taken seriously since she or he is so different, or as a universal category of person with no particularity. The nineteenth-century western idea of the “noble savage”, or the unthinking assumptions in the early days of the women’s movement that saw “women” as a one large unspecified category of human beings, are examples of this kind of thinking. Both are pernicious and unacceptable. In failing to acknowledge difference and otherness, we make the other into a romantic ideal or a universal category, rather than regarding them as specific persons. By dominating others, we determine their reality. We never afford the other the dignity of being engaged as a real person in all her or his difference.

The stories from Italy, Spain and Canada paint another picture. They show us how differences between those who have and those who do not, those who are free and those who have known prison life, those who are aliens and those who belong are bridged, in obedience to the Gospel, by stretching out across differences in acts of care and generosity.

**Unravelling difference and otherness**

On returning to the problematic responses to difference and otherness, the question arises: How do we understand difference and otherness in all their complexity, ambiguity and possibility?

To speak of the other is to speak of space, boundaries, time, difference, our bodies, cultures, traditions, ideologies and beliefs. To speak of the other is to speak of that other human being whom I may mistakenly have assumed to be just like me and who, in fact, is not like me at all. To speak of the other is to be open to otherness within myself, to the possibility of a foreigner within my own unconscious self. To speak of the other is to speak of poverty and justice, of human sexuality, of gender, race and class. To speak of the other is to acknowledge that difference is problematic, often threatening, even alienating and that we do not always live easily or well with it.  

To speak about the other is to speak about the nature of the church, the one body of many parts, challenged to unity in Jesus Christ. To speak of the Other is to speak about the ambiguity of God, the One who is Wholly Other and Wholly Related. We must always be alert to the reality of difference. It will not go away, neither should it. It is who we are. Being in relationship happens within the reality and the challenge of difference and otherness.

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6 M. Shawn Copeland, “Difference as a category in critical theologies for the liberation of women” in E. S. Fiorenza and M. S. Copeland (eds.), *Feminist Theology in Different Contexts*. Concilium 1996/1 London: S.C.M. Press, 1996, p. 143 writes: “Difference insinuates not merely variance, but deviation, division, discrepancy, discord, incongruity, incompatibility, inconsistency, anomaly, contrariety, aberration and misunderstanding”. She adds: “…difference carries forward struggle for life in its uniqueness, variation and fullness; difference is a celebrative option for life in all its integrity, in all its distinctiveness”.

An ethic of relationship

What is meant by relationship? Although relationship is central to our being and to our well-being, it is difficult to define and even more difficult to live. It is easier to say what relationship is not: it is not alienation or apathy, isolation or separation. We are not made to live alone. Relationship is what connects us to one another like the strands of a web, spinning out in ever widening circles, fragile and easily damaged, yet filled with tensile strength. Relationships shape us as individuals and as members of our communities. In the words of ethicist Beverly Harrison, “relationality is at the heart of all things”.

There is an African saying which declares: “A person is a person through other persons”. This articulates what we call ubuntu. This traditional African philosophy and way of life sees all of creation as sacred. Humanity is part of a vast interrelated web. As John Mbiti has put it so strikingly: “I belong therefore I am”. In this boundless human web I acquire my humanity as something which comes to me as a gift. My humanity is found, shaped and nurtured in and through the humanity of others.

I can only exercise my humanity by being in relationship with others and there is no growth, happiness or fulfilment for me apart from other human beings. Finally, because of this notion of a universal human web of relationships, no one is a stranger. Archbishop emeritus Desmond Tutu comments:

…a solitary human being is a contradiction in terms. A totally self-sufficient human being is ultimately subhuman. We are made for complementarity. I have gifts that you do not; and you have gifts that I do not. Voilà! So we need each other to become fully human.

Not all relationships are good. Relationships can be oppressive. Personal

7 See Ruthellen Josselson, The Space between Us: Exploring the Dimensions of Human Relationships. San Francisco: Jossy-Bass Publishers, 1992, pp. 2-3, where she observes that the word ‘relationship’ has become hackneyed. “When people speak of ‘having a relationship’, they are usually referring to a sexual partnership. Relationships are to be ‘had’ rather than “created in the flow of intention, action and response between people”. See also pp. 4-10 where she sets out eight dimensions of relatedness which form the core of her book.


9 Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu.


11 This idea is not foreign to European thought. It was already present in Hegel’s Phenomenology and has been developed in the twentieth-century philosophies of, among others, Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, John MacMurray and Paul Ricoeur. Feminist theologians such as Carter Heyward, Beverly Harrison, Elizabeth Johnson and Catherine Keller have also written about women’s brand of ubuntu. Yet the concept of relationship is still in striking contrast to much western thinking with its emphasis on individualism and self-sufficiency as a mark of the mature person. The move from the rational Cartesian man (and I mean “man”) at the centre of the universe, is yet to be completed.

12 A critique of ubuntu among some African intellectuals is that it can have the effect of “levelling” people to one accepted norm which can stifle individuality.

relationships are often the terrain in which abusive power is exercised. The idea of relationship needs to be qualified. For relationships to be right, loving and just they have to be mutual and reciprocal. Fully human relationships cannot be one-sided. They can only be created out of mutual interdependence and they flourish only when both parties work on them. The concept of mutuality in relationship is the touchstone against which the quality of our relationships is tested. Mutuality is concerned with the feelings, needs and interests of the each other. Mutuality spells forbearance, generosity, kindness, forgiveness and considerateness, virtues often neglected. Mutuality is the reciprocal interdependence of equals.

Mutual relationship does not do away with difference. Each person is a distinct individual who acts, thinks and feels in relation to the other’s actions, thoughts and feelings. The other remains truly other. Respect for the other, or lack of it, is a matter of intention. You choose whether you will respect me despite our differences across race, ideology, sexual orientation and culture; I choose whether I will respect you.

If we do not act in relationship there is no hope for the building of community. Community is the result of mutual relationships as well as the place in which these relationships are put to the test. Being a “community in difference is a hard-won achievement”. All communities have to deal with the failure of their members to support each other and the common good. Those communities which are strong enough, and I would like to think that the church is such a community, can deal with the troubles and betrayals which afflict them. If the community is too fragile and too many betrayals have taken place, such a community can wither and die. Community does not just happen. It takes recognition of our interdependence and willingness to carry our differences into what African-American theologian Shawn Copeland describes as “deep-going conversion and serious honest conversation- speaking with head and heart and flesh; listening with head and heart and flesh.”

In summary, the problem of difference and otherness is the problem of relationship. To be fully human is to live with relatedness. To love is to be in relationship. To do justice is to be in right relationship. To practice Christian hospitality is to be in relationship. Relationships are not optional. We do not live self-contained, self-directed and undisturbed existences. This is no quiet time. It is up to us to determine the nature of our relationships and our communities. How can our Christian beliefs help us to choose to live well across our differences?

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15 Copeland, ‘Difference as category’, p. 149.

16 Copeland, ‘Difference as category’, p. 149.

A theological perspective on an ethic of relationship in difference and otherness

We worship a triune God. Ours is a Trinity which is in relation – between God the Creator, Jesus, the Redeemer and the Spirit, the Sustainer. However, the mutual self-giving relationship of the Trinity does not mean that Father, Son and Spirit are collapsed into one undifferentiated divinity. Each member of the Trinity acts as an agent. Each one of the divine persons of the Trinity gives of the self to the other while at the same time each reflects the presence of the other.\(^{18}\)

For us this means that we have a “God who came into the world so as to make human beings, created in the image of God, live with one another and with God in the kind of communion in which divine persons live with one another.”\(^{19}\) Our God is in mutual and reciprocal relationship with each one of us, with our community of faith, with all other faith communities and with the whole of creation. It is God’s desire for relationship which offers us the potential of being in relationship with God, ourselves, each other and with all that God has made.

This understanding of God-in-relation with humanity permeates the stories in our scriptures. In the beginning God saw that all was good. Adam and Eve also saw one another as good and were fully human together without difference-as-domination clouding their mutual relationship. Then the picture changes. Alienated otherness enters Eden. God calls out: “Where are you?” The man replies “I was afraid...I hid myself....She gave me fruit from the tree”. The woman says: “The serpent tricked me, and I ate” (Gen. 3:9-13). Instead of the sound of God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze being the preamble to the enjoyment of continued relationship, there is now blame, hostility and estrangement. This vivid tale and many others in the Hebrew scriptures continue to tell of the need to strive for restored relationship with God and with each other. People argue and wrestle with God, are disobedient and repentant, are punished and blessed by God, are far from God or close enough to see the back of God pass by. We have a picture of a God intensely in relation with us.

In the covenant tradition, God expressly confirms a relationship of love, faithfulness and of presence with humanity. We, in turn, struggle to live up to God’s covenanting love. Sadly, our understanding of covenant has often degenerated into religious chauvinism. Christian attempts to exclude Jews from the ‘new’ covenant have, for instance, tragically resulted in the scandal of anti-Semitism and its history of atrocities. God’s covenant relationship with us is loving and just, as ours should be with one another. The covenant promises ongoing mutual relationship.

This promise is continued in Jesus’ vision of what life would be like when God’s reign comes in its fullness. We, as baptized citizens of this new time, are responsible for making its values visible in our actions. Jesus spells out our


\(^{19}\) Volf, \textit{Exclusion and Embrace}, p. 181.
calling: mutual loving relationships with God and with our neighbour as ourselves. For Christians, Jesus’ radical life-changing love is the example of how to live in the world in a way “that deepens relation, embodies and extends community, [and] passes on the gift of life”.20 This life-changing love is wonderfully portrayed in the stories from Italy, Spain and Canada.

Finally, Paul’s writings describe authentic existence in a number of ways. He is fond of using organic images to explain our relationship to Christ: “Believers are ‘grafted into’ him (Rom.6:5) or are ‘rooted’ in him (Col. 2:7)....The dominant image, however, is that of the living human body. Believers are members of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 10:17; 12:2-27; Rom. 12:4-5)....”.21 Paul, well aware of the multiplicity of the body, is primarily concerned with its inner unity and harmony. He understands the Body of Christ as a living unity, not just a collection of people assembled for some purpose.

[The Body of Christ] was unified by a shared life derived from a single vital principle, [namely] Christ. What the physical body suggested to Paul was the idea of coexistence in the strict sense of that much abused term because this conveyed perfectly his understanding of authenticity.22

Authentic existence is living as a fully human part of a whole in mutual relationship, participating not possessing, needing one another, knowing that we belong to one another.

The practice of Christian relationship

The notion of practice is at the heart of living the gospel.23 Faithful Christian practice can only be ethical, effective and relevant if it takes seriously the challenge of relationship in difference and otherness. I believe that the moral calamity of this age lies in our lack of a shared moral framework as well as in our inability to implement the moral criteria we do share. Where do we start?

The starting point for us is simply this: we shall have to confess and to lament our unwillingness to deal lovingly with neighbours who are different. We have not welcomed one another as Christ has welcomed us, for the glory of God (Rom.15:7). Each day we disobey the command to love our neighbour, the ‘different other’, as ourselves. Too often we stigmatize the other and thus refuse to be in relationship with her or him.

For those of us who have been used to dominant power or whose souls and minds are closed by rigid ideologies and fear of the other, an epiphany is needed.24 Without an epiphany we live in a state where reality is merely and

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20 Harrison, Making the Connections, p. 18.
22 Murphy-O’Connor, Becoming Human, p. 179.
only the reality of my own consciousness. The habit of putting the injunction “to love your neighbour as yourself” through hoops of devious reasoning, is deeply embedded. We forget that Jesus taught us that our neighbour is the radically other who is also the radically related. We forget that our neighbour has inviolable claims on us to be welcomed as Christ has welcomed us. There are of course no recipes for making epiphanies happen. But when an epiphany does happen, we are caught in “a traumatism of astonishment” and radical change becomes conceivable.

Experiencing an epiphany helps us understand that mutual relationship is not an abstract theological truth. This is the second moment in a process of conversion to relationship. Mutual relationship is practiced with our entire being - our bodies, our emotions and our minds - in what we see, hear, say and do. The practice of relationship is both profoundly simple and formidably demanding. We are innately relational beings. We are also congenitally antagonistic. We have to learn and practice relational living in what we do with our bodies. How we worship, where we take communion, how we communicate with one another, our care for those in need, are all bodily practices and not abstract ungrounded notions of community or pastoral care. Ethics are about what we do, moment by moment, day by day, in our bodies, as much in our political activities as in our personal relationships.

The third moment in the practice of mutual relationship comes when I turn my gaze from myself and “look” into the face of the other. It is you and I, they and we, seeing and being seen. In the face of the other I see a true and authentic human being. We both reflect something of the image of God. The practice of relationship means that I acknowledge that I am not complete unto myself. I see myself in the face of the other. I am not fully myself until I can see “me” in your face. You are the mirror of myself. I am the mirror of yourself. Only when we can see ourselves and each other are we fully human.

At the moment of truly seeing the other and being seen, surprised and illuminated, I am converted to relatedness and I hope that the other chooses to be in relationship with me. Then, and only then, do I begin to fathom the claims of justice and love that are made on me: by the hungry child, the abused woman, the refugee on a dusty road, those whose colour or gender are different from mine, whose sexuality is not mine, whose ideologies are not mine, whose religion is not mine, whose community is at odds with mine. Seeing has to be reciprocal, because both parties must be equally involved for the benefit of each and of the relationship.

26 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, p. 74.
27 I am aware of the fact that not everybody can see or hear physically. Insight and knowledge are, however, not just or primarily physical.
28 Ricoeur, Oneself as Another, p. 9 writes: “…the idea of God is in me as the very mark of the author upon his work, a mark that assures the resemblance between us.”
29 Ricoeur, Oneself as Another, p. 3, describes this experience as follows: “…the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other, that instead one passes into the other...”
The epiphany does not end here. In a fourth step, I am impelled toward the practice of relationship and am now open to “hear” the story of the other.\footnote{See Ricoeur, \textit{Oneself as Another}, pp. 140-168.} Our stories constitute our identity. We all have a narrative identity. Many narratives are painful and for some (such as refugees, or the poor) their identities have been stolen, crushed or denied to the extent that their stories are silenced. Such circumstances are of course in themselves stories. Our stories reveal our differences. We hear and speak different stories. Stories evoke dangerous memories.\footnote{See Johann Baptist Metz, \textit{Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Society}. New York: Seabury Press, 1980, p. 89.} Stories require the unflinching admission of participation in oppressive practices and systems. Telling our stories, hearing the stories of others, allows our stories to intersect. Sometimes they conflict, accuse and even diverge greatly, sometimes they attract, connect and confirm. As our stories touch one another, they change, and we too are changed.

Lastly, storytelling is a preamble to ongoing relationship. We acknowledge the differences between us and begin to seek common ground. We tell our stories across differences, for the sake of relationship in difference and otherness. “Conversation in its primary form is an exploration of possibilities in the search for truth”.\footnote{David Tracy, \textit{Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope}. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 20.} We dare not cease the conversation. Disagreements, incompatible interpretations of what truth is, even conflict should not deter us. Without conversation we become unable to respond to the call to be fully human. At best all we have is a ‘learned ignorance’ of what it means to be a human being. To counter this danger, we do have the one certainty that there is no full humanity without the other.\footnote{Tracy, \textit{Plurality and Ambiguity}, p. 78, reminds us: “...our hope... is grounded in conversation....Otherness has entered, and it is no longer outside us among the ‘others’. The most radical otherness is within. Unless we acknowledge that, it will be impossible for us to responsibly participate in, or meaningfully belong to, our history.”.}

**Difference and oneness in the Eucharist**

We are blessed as Christians to be a covenanted Eucharistic community. At the Lord’s table we are offered the consummate step in forging an ethic of relationship in difference and otherness. This visible, bodily practice of relationship with all its potential for healing is ours. Through the Eucharist our relationship with the Word who became flesh, died on a cross and rose again, offers us relationship with those who are at the altar rail with us and with all who suffer and seek new life.

During those terrible years in my country when difference was used as category to exclude the majority of people from their rightful place, I learnt the true challenge of “we who are many are one body for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor 12:12). Sharing the cup with a bergie\footnote{Homeless people who live on the slopes of Table Mountain, Cape Town, are know as bergies, which means ‘people of the mountain’.} seeking warmth in the cathedral, with street children who wander in looking for money to spend on bread or glue, with women and men across all racial and class divides, with the
Nationalist politician whose ideology I despised, shattered the chains of the apartheid view of difference like a thunderbolt. I continue to remind myself of the power of the “one cup” as I stand next to the church council member whose sexist attitudes undermine vestry meetings and the cleric who believes that only men may consecrate the meal. I also stand next to the person I know is HIV positive, the father carrying his daughter with tubes coming from her head, the friend who is riddled with cancer and the pregnant woman seeking a blessing for her unborn child.

For the Eucharist to have meaning in our lives, we need to feel its powerful pull to the radical activity of loving relationships with those who are different. This I believe we can learn from the stories coming out Italy, Spain and Canada. The One who calls us to the table knows our differences. The One who issues the invitation and asks us to make peace with one another when we come to the table, knows full well just how difficult that can be. The call to live in mutuality is nothing less than the call to grapple daily with the challenges, implications, and surprises of seeking to be in relationship with each other in all our difference and otherness.